

*ACG Minnesota's Monthly Luncheon was held on September 17, 2019 at Windows on Minnesota in the IDS Center, Minneapolis, featuring speaker Ben Leber.*

### **Ben Leber Wins from Within**

Ben Leber, a retired 10-year NFL linebacker, played for San Diego, Minnesota and St. Louis over the course of his physically active sports career. Lucky for Minnesotans, Leber landed in our state after his 2012 NFL retirement and transition into a sports commentary career. He's currently a broadcaster for college football on Fox Sports and the Minnesota Vikings, and a sideline analyst for KFAN radio in Minneapolis.

Leber was born in a small town in Iowa and raised in Vermillion, South Dakota, but he did not think small. With his sights set on Space Camp in Alabama as a child, he envisioned himself an astronaut. Being in the dark about how much the odds were stacked against him becoming either an astronaut or the career he'd fixated on by high school as a professional football player was probably a good thing Leber noted. He shared these odds with our particularly numbers-focused group: 1 in 39 players move from high school to D1 (2.5%) and 1 in 603 players advance from college to the NFL (.17%). Pretty slim.

He pulled back the curtain a bit for us, sharing a transitional moment of overcoming self-doubt and self-limitations that occurred after his first summer of practice at Kansas State. He was wrestling with the idea that he just wasn't a super physical player. And as he stepped into official full-contact practice with pads, that doubt became apparent. Essentially he read the look of disappointment all over his coach's face and understood the unspoken ultimatum – he would need to perform the next day or step aside for the next candidate in line who was willing to make the hit.

He contemplated it, worked through it and resolved to make the hit the following day. Mission accomplished. From this example and turning point, came the learning experience that forced the question: *do you want it?* This is a question that a professional athlete outsider might envision gets answered in a moment on the field. However, Leber's insight clearly indicated that these are answers arrived at internally through intensive self-reflection off the field that are called upon so athletes can perform when it matters.

Win from Within, Leber's philosophy he shares with groups like ours and in schools all over (see NFL Play 60 Program), is an inward-looking concept for change and growth. He talks about belief (do you want it?) followed by commitment, work and improvement, which all equate to change. Cue the Rocky movie clip, *If I can change and you can change, then everybody can change.*

An essential part of change, is handling criticism he says, "You have to crave criticism to get better." Admittedly the message from a coach early on in Leber's career that he couldn't handle criticism cut him deep. *Don't take things so personally*, was the harsh feedback heard of other teammates, but not about himself until that moment. Cue the Jack Nicholson clip from A Few Good Men, *You can't handle the truth.*

Leber developed a mental toughness over time and again pulled back the curtain to share a day in the life of a pro athlete with our audience of successful business professionals. Imagine if we were to record your activity through your day, then place your actions under a microscope to be reviewed and scrutinized by leaders and peers each day as they do in the NFL. It's harsh.

It's this sort of process and mental toughness that creates acceptance, humility and motivation. While you might not be on film at your place of business, you can create this process for yourself internally by doing five minutes of mental gymnastics daily. Attack your actions. Figure out what's holding you back. Check your ego every day. Cue the clip from Starsky and Hutch, *Do it*.

As a professional athlete who's transitioned into business, Leber's sports analogies rang true and applicable. He advised that business leaders give employees feedback monthly at a minimum. He set a reminder for anyone who wants to change or accomplish anything worthwhile: you first have to want it, then find the mental courage, own it and do the work. Take it from the five-time Korey Stringer Good Guy award recipient during his five-year run with the Vikings, the work is necessary and worth it.

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